

Pandemic Prevention and Preparedness Bill

Second Reading—Debate Adjourned

Hon. Marie-Françoise Mégie moved second reading of Bill C-293, An Act respecting pandemic prevention and preparedness.

She said: Honourable senators, I am honoured to sponsor Bill C-293, An Act respecting pandemic prevention and preparedness.

Please rest assured that I will not need the full 45 minutes allotted to me to demonstrate the merits of the principle of preventive health that underpins this bill.

Bill C-293 seeks to prevent the risk of and prepare for future pandemics. The principle of Bill C-293 can be summarized in two sayings that you are all familiar with. The first is “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” and the second is the Scout motto, “be prepared.”

The human and economic impacts of a pandemic are quantifiable. In fact, the Office of the Auditor General of Canada publicly shared the audits related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before I go any further, I would like to define two terms: “epidemic” and “pandemic.” An epidemic is the rapid increase and spread of an infectious and contagious disease in a specific region.

A pandemic is an epidemic that crosses national borders and can spread over a continent, a hemisphere or the entire world. It can affect millions of people if they are not immunized or if there are no drugs to treat the disease. That is what happened with COVID-19.

Nowadays, climate change is raising the risk of epidemics and pandemics. For example, because of global warming, animal species that carry diseases like Lyme disease or Zika virus, which are transmitted by mosquitoes and ticks, are proliferating as they travel through northern latitudes into Canada.

Pandemics are unpredictable and can have serious health, societal, and economic consequences, so Canada must be prepared to respond to infectious diseases with pandemic potential at all times.

That’s why the Auditor General of Canada produced her eighth report, entitled *Pandemic Preparedness, Surveillance, and Border Control Measures*.

(1620)

This report was tabled in the Senate on March 30, 2021. The Auditor General wrote the following:

When a pandemic occurs, identifying, tracking, and forecasting the disease’s spread are important so that all levels of government can quickly respond and deploy resources as required to limit the spread of the disease.

A Radio-Canada article dated June 24, 2021, reads as follows:

The Global Public Health Intelligence Network, the system responsible for tracking epidemics and the transmission of infectious diseases elsewhere in the world, did not issue an alert about the virus outbreak in Wuhan, China.

The Auditor General also rebuked the Public Health Agency for introducing changes that limited the ability of the Global Public Health Intelligence Network to issue pandemic alerts.

Government decision makers must have timely access to credible risk assessments in order to mount an effective response. It’s equally important to have an effective national monitoring system in place to gather, discuss, analyze and share public health information. Responses can include border control measures, such as travel restrictions, border closures and quarantine or lockdown orders.

The Auditor General's conclusion was unequivocal: The agency was not adequately prepared to respond to a pandemic. The agency had not addressed some long-standing health surveillance information issues prior to the pandemic. Had it done so, it could have been better prepared. The Auditor General made numerous recommendations in that regard, all of which were accepted by the agency.

Honourable colleagues, on September 24, the federal government created a new agency to strengthen our industrial capabilities in the life sciences and biomanufacturing sector in order to support Canada's health emergency readiness. We need only think of the frantic race that often takes place outside the country to secure the personal protective equipment, including gloves, masks and disinfectants, needed to deal with a pandemic.

The creation of Health Emergency Readiness Canada, the new federal agency within Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada, will help protect Canadians against future pandemics.

For those who were not in the Senate at the time, on November 24, 2021, eight months after the audit was tabled, I introduced Bill S-209 to establish Pandemic Observance Day.

Since the bill received Royal Assent, March 11 of each year has become a day to commemorate the pandemic. Its three cardinal principles are to remember, to recover and to prepare.

At the time, there was still the work of caring for and supporting those with COVID. The aim is to break the cycle so that the most vulnerable members of our society do not become even more vulnerable with each pandemic.

For example, mobile care, which includes things like vaccination or screening trucks, is a concept that has been around for a long time, as noted by medical historian Laurence Monnais, a professor of the history of medicine and public health at the Institut des humanités en médecine in Lausanne, Switzerland. I want to quote her:

Couldn't the state go back to using this kind of initiative more often, both for real prevention and for ensuring that everyone has equal access to health services?

During Canada's latest pandemic, many opposition politicians harshly criticized the government for its lack of pandemic preparedness.

I agree. Canada can and must do better.

Author Yuval Noah Harari wrote that every crisis is also an opportunity. The creation of the Department of Health in 1919 after the Spanish flu and the creation of the Public Health Agency of Canada in 2004 after SARS stemmed from the health crises our country went through.

Bill C-293 is a legislative response to the recommendations of the Auditor General. It is also a response to the criticisms about Canada's inadequate pandemic preparedness.

I want to acknowledge the commitment of the member for Beaches—East York on this topic that is so important to me.

I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but pandemics are cyclical. It's not a matter of if, but when the next one will happen.

I hope that this bill will receive your swift support so that it may be studied in detail in committee as soon as possible.

I hope that Canada will always be prepared to protect Canadians and serve as an example for the entire world.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Senators: Hear, hear.

[English]

Hon. Donald Neil Plett (Leader of the Opposition): I have a few questions if Senator Mégie will take them.

[Translation]

The Hon. the Speaker pro tempore: Senator Mégie, Senator Plett has some questions for you.

Senator Mégie: Yes.

[English]

Senator Plett: Thank you, senator, and thank you for your speech.

Senator Mégie, I am sure you are aware that the agricultural industry has some very serious concerns about this bill to the point of being alarmed at what it proposes.

Could you tell this chamber what is meant in subparagraph 3(2)(l)(ii) where the bill states:

(2) The pandemic prevention and preparedness plan must

(l) after consultation with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the Minister of Industry and provincial governments, provide for measures to

(ii) regulate commercial activities that can contribute to pandemic risk, including industrial animal agriculture,

The bill also contains the following statement:

(l) after consultation with the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, the Minister of Industry and provincial governments, provide for measures to

(iii) promote commercial activities that can help reduce pandemic risk, including the production of alternative proteins

Why would this bill include that statement? Are you suggesting that animal proteins are the cause of pandemics that require phasing out?

[Translation]

Senator Mégie: Thank you for the question. It's not because of that at all. It's because we already know that there are often issues when it comes to biosecurity on farms. That is what we need to take action on. We don't need to get into detail on that now. We can wait until we study this bill in committee. Then we can invite farmers from various sectors of the agricultural industry to appear. They will be able to tell us what needs to be done, because they will make suggestions based on their fears and on what can be done to allay those fears. We can't impose that now.

[English]

Senator Plett: I have a list of questions, but I'll stick to one more question if I could.

[Translation]

The Hon. the Speaker pro tempore: Will you take another question, senator?

Senator Mégie: Yes, I can take another question.

[English]

Senator Plett: As you know, the bill also states the following:

(2) The pandemic prevention and preparedness plan must

— and this is what concerns me a great deal —

(m) include the following information, to be provided by the Minister of the Environment:

(ii) a summary of the measures the Minister of the Environment intends to take to reduce the risk that the commercial wildlife trade in Canada and abroad will lead to a pandemic, including measures to regulate or phase out live animal markets

What “live animal markets” in Canadian agriculture does this bill want to regulate or phase out?

[Translation]

Senator Mégie: When it comes to this kind of market, the aim is always to be better equipped. It's important to meet the people who are involved in the market's comings and goings, internationally and otherwise.

(1630)

Speaking of animals, we need to remember that there was a time when we were talking about bird flu. We need to manage this aspect and prevent the comings and goings so that we can try and figure out where the source is and where to close things down in order to prevent it from spreading; that is how we will figure it out. As far as the bill is concerned, we can invite people to come and tell the committee how they and their agricultural industry might react, what they need, what measures they need to be able to protect their crops or animals. The solutions have to come from them, in collaboration with the departments, since, of course, they're the ones that are going to act.

[English]

Senator Plett: I have an observation that you can reply to. I find it strange. I appreciate your answers, and, of course, I understand that you will not know everything that has gone into this. For us to have to wait for the farmers to come and defend their livestock or the animal activists to try to phase out animals, I think the bill needs to be a little more explicit. It is a fairly scary statement when we say, “. . . including measures to regulate or phase out live animal markets” You are telling me now that the witnesses have to come and tell us that.

Would you not agree that the architect of the bill should tell us what their plan is?

[Translation]

Senator Mégie: I don't think there is a set plan. In fact, during studies in committee, when we need solutions we can count on the witnesses, who are the people designated for proposing solutions to the difficulties they experience or the difficulties they face when it comes time to enforce the bill. You or your colleagues might propose amendments, if you find that what was proposed does not make sense. It is our role of sober second thought: We can offer solutions and propose amendments. You will be entirely free to propose amendments.

[English]

Hon. Denise Batters: I have a couple of questions as well.

Senator Mégie, being from Saskatchewan I have heard from many farmers who are very concerned about this bill. Now we hear quite a short second reading speech that doesn't really address some of those major concerns they have about the promotion of alternative proteins and about the phase-out, as Senator Plett was saying, of some of their very livelihoods. How do you alleviate those concerns for them other than telling them that they can come to committee, perhaps — if the committee invites them — and have their say there so that they don't have to worry about their livelihoods being threatened?

[Translation]

Senator Mégie: You know how it works when we invite witnesses. We have to invite the right witnesses and those who will speak about their industry, what they are doing and their concerns. Then we can find solutions with them and we will do a thorough analysis of the issue. This was done intentionally and I can provide all these details later. If I shared these details now, I would have to propose solutions myself and I do not have those solutions. I purposely did not present them.

[English]

Senator Batters: At the end, the translation came through as “I don’t have those solutions,” but you are the bill’s sponsor in the Senate. Usually what happens with a second reading speech — you have seen it go through the House of Commons, and there have been many concerns raised for quite some time since the bill has gone through the House of Commons, as we’ve just had the summer recess.

As you say, you do not have any solutions, but what is your response to those farmers who are very concerned that this bill does great harm to their livelihoods? Do you think that perhaps it does, or do you contend that it does not? What are the reasons for saying that?

It shouldn’t all be left to the committee. There should be some response in the debate process before we send it to committee.

[Translation]

Senator Mégie: I will answer the first part of your question.

Typically, we don’t have to present a solution at second reading if we don’t yet have one, and that is because, in the end, once this has been studied in committee and we have the proposed amendments, the report may provide solutions.

Hon. Raymonde Saint-Germain: Senator Mégie, I understand that we are currently talking about the principle, about examining the principle of this bill, which is about preventing pandemics. It’s a precautionary principle that is becoming a priority, first and foremost to preserve human health and life, but also to preserve animal husbandry and the interests of farmers and the other partners in Canada’s economic chain. Is that indeed the primary principle of this bill, and will the more detailed questions regarding implementation — of either the law or possibly regulations — be examined in committee?

Senator Mégie: As I told you, second reading is precisely about examining the principle of the bill. We want to prevent another pandemic, a new pandemic. I could tell you that a particular pandemic is going to come along, and I could tell you how to prevent it, but do I have all the information? When COVID came along, people didn’t know what it was. They didn’t know if it was a virus or a bacterium. Once they knew it was a virus, they wondered how it would affect humans. They had to go through that whole process to find out what would happen. We have to be involved in those processes. Health professionals were able to say that if a particular thing happened, there would be a particular response. There has to be a whole thought process to get to that point.

It will be the same for farmers. If a particular event happens, such as a zoonotic outbreak on a farm, here’s how you respond. We can’t predict everything at second reading, though. Second reading is mostly for situating ourselves. We want to prevent the next pandemic, so we want to prevent contagion and transmission.

(On motion of Senator Martin, debate adjourned.)

[English]